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Chateau Musar Tasting with Serge Hochar, Terroni, Oct 18th, 2012



[Lebanon](#) is roughly at the same parallel as [Los Angeles](#) and its altitude is just about the same as the [Rhône Valley](#). For centuries its been an ideal place to grow grapes (the occasional wartime bombing to the contrary). Although there's a lengthy tradition of winemaking in the country, as far as anyone in the USA is concerned, the only [Lebanese wine](#) we've seen with any regularity are those from [Chateau Musar](#).

Serge Hochar of [Chateau Musar](#) passed through Los Angeles recently and [Chris Lavin](#) was kind enough to invite me to one of the tastings Serge was hosting. The wine room at Terroni was an ideal setting to take an in-depth look at some of the planet's most interesting (and controversial) wines.



Chateau Musar Winemaker Serge Hochar

Hochar is part sage and part winemaker, the sort of person exuding a grounded-in-reality Zenlike presence. About as quotable as anyone this side of Randall Grahm, his

approach to life is like his approach to wine – note the details but work with, around, and through them, all based on what’s necessary to get by and create something. There’s an intensity to him that’s rounded off by a gentle acceptance of (and approach to) life

He began the morning by telling us that “the art of communication begins with wine. Wine is the miracle of life; it makes itself, and through that I’ve made miracles.” He didn’t answer questions from the attendees so much as he engaged us in conversation, forcing us to rethink what we thought we already knew. I cannot recall any similar tastings where there was so much back-and-forth discussion. It was a nice change from the usual guided tastings that are handled as if they were lectures.

Most of the people in the room had had *some* previous experience with Musar, and the general consensus was that the wines are identifiable because they have high levels of VA and are oxidized to a certain extent – flaws according to most wine experts. This is one of those wineries where context is incredibly important to the appreciation of the wines, and this focused tasting was the perfect place to discover the essence of Hochar's work.

Says Serge: “We are born with oxidation, we must not fight it. Oxygen is part of life.” He continued: “I studied enology in Bordeaux and they taught me millions of things. I believed very little of it. Maturity is in itself a form of oxidation. I use it as a tool to make my wines better. When you control something, you miss other things, so I don’t bother controlling it much, I pay attention to what the wines want to do.”



These wines change in the glass perhaps more than any other wine I’ve tasted. The 1983 Musar Rouge is a brilliant example; when poured, my initial impression was that it was corked. However, a quick couple of swirls of the glass served to relieve the

scourge. This was an exceptional vintage in Lebanon and the wine displayed an elevated level of acidity that should give it almost endless aging potential. The situation was very similar to that of the 1986 Chateau Beaucastel Roussanne Vieilles Vignes that was poured at Hospice du Rhône several years ago. Out of 36 bottles provided, the general consensus was that at least 20 of them were corked. The winemaker disagreed and suggested vigorous aeration. After about four hours he was proven correct and the wines were quite glorious (unfortunately, the seminar had ended two hours previously). Fortunately, the 1983 Musar took to the air quite rapidly and it served as a perfect demonstration of not always following your first impression of a wine.

Hochar recommends *at least* 15 years aging in the cellar for all of his wines, as they take that long to show their true character. The 1975 grew extremely complex as it unveiled itself in the glass, with my notes reflecting meat, coffee/caramel and even lanolin and mint on its huge finish. Its hue was brighter than the 1983 and other than its overall evolution to a higher plateau in the cellar, it seemed like a youngster, with lots more aging potential ahead of it.

As Hochar told us, “you are changing more than the wine” when you think about what you’re drinking. It’s important to trust your own instincts. “Wine is a companion that will never betray you” he says. “Wine is always your friend. Find one you like and get to know it.”



Jared Hooper and Taylor Parsons

The Chateau Musar white wines were even more fascinating to me than the reds. Grown on ungrafted vines that are around 150-180 years of age (talk about Old World!), the Merwah and Obedideh grapes would be equally at home in the Rhône Valley or in Bordeaux in terms of their flavor profiles. The 1989 and the 1975 were my favorites, although the 2005 and 1998 were wonderful on their own terms. It's just that these are wines that really need the extra time to mature, and even at 14-15 years of age they're only just giving the drinker a glimpse of what they'll become.

The 1989 reminded me (a LOT) of Ygrex, [Chateau d'Yquem](#)'s dry white. It had the requisite VA and was almost sherry-like on the palate, but the brilliant acid structure combined with the underlying fruit to turn it into a thrilling tasting experience (similar to dry Sauternes or even Kalin Semillon from California). The 1975 was a whole other level of complexity, adding white pepper to the equation. Each sip was different, one revealing tropical fruit, the next spicy, then to sherry...it was deliciously complex, a wine difficult to describe but intriguing and compelling to taste. The finish seemed to last forever, and it was impossible to return to the other whites after focusing on this one.



Importer Bartholomew Broadbent and Serge Hochar

Winemaking in Lebanon has not been an easy avocation over the years. There have been times when the conflict has been so dangerous that Hochar has sent his family to live in Paris while he remained in Beirut to make the wines. "There's lots of talk about the situation in Lebanon, but the country could be on fire and the whole world doesn't care." He doesn't dwell on the hardships he endured to produce the Chateau Musar wines during the war years; he prefers to think about how he was able to keep his extended family (the workers) at the winery employed and safe through the war.

In a perfect world I'd have a cellar filled with wine from a bunch of different vintages of Chateau Musar. If I'd only "known then what I know now", this might have been a possibility; the wines have been underpriced until recently, but they're still bargains compared to anything comparable (granted, such a list of comparable wines would be limited to producers such as Valentini, [Lopez de Heredia](#), Chateau Simone, and other wines I view as savory rather than sweet). It was as rewarding, educational, and

thought-provoking of a tasting as I've experienced in recent memory. It was an honor to spend a little time with Serge Hochar, and I anticipate spending more time with his wine in the future.

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